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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 LIBREVILLE 000022

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [GB](#)  
SUBJECT: GABON: WORRIES PERSIST OVER BONGO,S HEALTH

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Classified By: DCM Nathan Holt for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

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Summary  
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¶1. (C) Embassy visitors calling on a mid-ranking official at Gabon's presidential palace January 14 caught a rare glimpse of an extremely frail President El Hadj Omar Bongo Ondimba being lifted into his presidential Rolls Royce en route to a ceremonial opening of the latest session of the Gabonese constitutional court. Once at the ceremony, Bongo walked unassisted for a short distance, listened to the proceedings, and otherwise maintained the distance and disengagement that are characteristic for him on such occasions. The 73 year-old Bongo is the world's longest serving head of state, and his health is a national obsession. Though he appears to retain mental acuity, he has grown noticeably weaker, thinner and less mobile. He and his handlers are careful to shield the public from scenes like the one we witnessed at the palace. End Summary.

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Surprising Scene  
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¶2. (C) Embassy poloff and visiting AF/C desk officer unexpectedly found themselves a few yards away from President Bongo in the courtyard of the presidential palace January 14 as Bongo departed for the latest in a series of public ceremonies that mark the new year in Gabon. The officers were there to meet another official. Bongo was physically lifted by two aides, one supporting his legs and the other his torso, and placed into the backseat of the presidential Rolls Royce. Once inside the vehicle, aides physically repositioned the president to his accustomed location in the backseat.

¶3. (C) Bongo arrived a short while later to preside at the opening of the latest session of the Constitutional Court, where the Ambassador observed him walk deliberately but unaided to his seat. He then stood unassisted for the national anthem and sat for the brief remarks by the head of the court. Characteristically, Bongo did not mix with guests or speak extemporaneously.

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National Obsession,  
But No Public Discussion  
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¶4. (C) Bongo collapsed and lost consciousness as a result of an unspecified medical condition in early November 2008, a fact unreported in Gabon (reftel). Public discussion of the president's health is strictly taboo, and the presidency releases no public information on the subject.

¶5. (C) It is clear from both public and private encounters that Bongo retains most or all of his mental acuity.

However, there are persistent reports of the president's "fatigue" and rumors that he has suffered additional, unspecified medical setbacks. He has apparently lost weight and speaks more often from a seated position in his public appearances. And based on what we witnessed at the presidential palace, Bongo's physical mobility appears to have deteriorated--perhaps significantly--in the last several weeks.

¶6. (C) Military and protocol aides in Bongo's immediate physical vicinity strike us as unusually watchful, particularly when the president is moving or speaking. We have recently observed one aide who stays close to the president with what appears to be a medium-sized black duffle bag, perhaps containing medical equipment. In any case, Bongo's son and potential successor Defense Minister Ali Bongo is said to have ordered a shakeup in arrangements for monitoring the president's health (and responding to any crisis) in the wake of the president's collapse last November.

¶7. (C) President Bongo does not smoke, drinks alcohol in great moderation, and is said to maintain a lifelong custom of healthy eating. Despite his apparent ill-health, he maintains a vigorous schedule of public appearances, diplomatic engagement and international travel--including frequent travel to visit his ailing wife in Morocco, whose apparently debilitating medical condition is also shrouded in secrecy.

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Comment

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¶8. (C) Bongo's health is a central political preoccupation in Gabon, with sub rosa jockeying already underway by family members and courtiers who would like to take his place. The president's death would be a worrisome event, but we are equally concerned by the potentially negative consequences of a prolonged decline in his health and ability to govern. Aside from the growing power of his son the defense minister, there is little evidence that Bongo is making plans to deal with the inevitable consequences of his own mortality. End Comment.

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